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AN ANCIENT NORTH ARABIAN INSCRIBED NEFESH STELE FROM THE VICINITY OF JERASH (NORTH-WESTERN JORDAN) *

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Abstract – The present study tackles an *nfs*¹ North Arabian inscription discovered in a close vicinity of Jerash (North-Western Jordan) by a French archaeological expedition in the eighties of the last century. The *lam auctoris*, the personal name and the word *nfs*¹ are treated philologically in the context of the Semitic onomasticon and lexica. The geographical setting of the inscription is discussed as well.

Key-Words – North Arabia, Jerash, epigraphy, Jordan, funerary stone

Résumé – La présente étude aborde une ancienne inscription nord-arabique découverte à proximité de Jerash (nord-ouest de la Jordanie) par une expédition archéologique française dans les années 1980. La *lam auctoris*, le nom personnel et le mot *nfs*¹ sont traités philologiquement dans le contexte de l'*onomasticon* et du *lexica* sémitiques. Le contexte géographique est également discuté.

Mots-clés – Arabie du Nord, Jerash, épigraphie, Jordanie, pierre funéraire

ملخص – تعالج هذه الدراسة نقشاً عربياً شمالياً عتيقاً عثر عليه فريقٌ آثارى فرنسي خلال مسحٍ أثري تَضَمَّنَ كلاً من جين سابين وفِرَاسُو فِلْتَيْف في منتصف ثمانينيات القرن الماضي في حقل زراعي يقع في منطقة تُدعى عين الجرن إلى الشمال الغربي من مدينة جرش في شمال الأردن. تَضَمَّنَتِ الدِّراسةُ مُعَالَجَةً لُغَوِيَّةً لِلنَّقْشِ ومفرداته واسم العلم الوارد فيه، بالتركيز على كلمة ن ف س واشتقاقها ودلالاتها وسياق استعمالها الحضاري، واللام الاستهلالية الواردة في مطلعها، ومعانيها في مثل هذا النوع من النقوش الجنائزية. كما بيَّن الباحث الأهمية الحضارية التاريخية لمكان العثور على النقش في سياق جغرافي تشيخ فيه النقوش العربية الشمالية العتيقة.

كلمات محوري – شمال الجزيرة العربية، جرش، الأردن، حجر جنائزي

The present inscription was discovered on the 1st of June 1986 by Jean Sapin (†) and François Villeneuve in Ayn Al-Jurn in north-west of *Jerash* (Gerasa = Greek Γέρασα), which lies ca. 50 km to the north of Amman in Jordan (**fig. 1**). I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Professor F. Villeneuve (Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne) for drawing my attention to this important stone and the encouragement to publish it. The digitized photos of the stone were put at my disposal by him.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STONE AS A *NFS*¹ / *NEFEŠ* STELE:

This unprepared or chamfered stone (**fig. 2-3**) was simply reused in a modern field (*karm*) wall ¹. No autoptic examination was possible due to the loss of the stone. Its archaeological context is unknown

*. This contribution was composed during my two-month stay in summer 2016 as a visiting scholar at the Department of Area Studies of Leiden University. I am indebted to Dr. Ahmad Al-Jallad for his valuable comments on an early version of this contribution.

1. Personal communication with Prof. F. Villeneuve.



Figure 1. Coordinates of the location of the inscription. The their coordinates according UTM (N=767436.47m, E=3585776.24m - Zone 36) © Google Earth

and no registration number is available ². From its shape and the text chiselled on it, it is obvious that it was used in ancient times as a grave stele (*nfs*¹ [or “*nefesh*”]) for commemorative purposes. It measures in length approximately 90 cm and appears to have been inscribed on one side only. The text begins on the wide edge of the stone. In all probability, it had been wedged into the earth from its tapered edge to reach a certain point of depth and guarantee its stability; there is an interval of approximately 10-15 cm after the last incised letter *s*¹. The direction of the text leaves no doubt that the wide edge is the top of the stele. This would guarantee the readability of the letters at the end of the text.

The tradition of erecting an *nfs* ³ stele for commemorative purposes is widely known in the Levant and Arabia. ⁴ The first attestation of the term *nefesh* ⁵ dates back to the 8th cent. BC in the Sam’alian Kuttamuwa inscription from Zincirli. ⁶ The fifth-century Taymā’ stele provides us with our first datable example of its use in North Arabia. ⁷ The *nefesh* began as the house of a dead man’s soul, and then developed to signify not only the gravestone but also a fully-fledged tomb. It is obvious now that the *nfs/š* as a

2. According to Frank Braemer, it was discovered at the very beginning of an Ifapo survey (Institut français d’archéologie du Proche-Orient, now part of Ifpo) in the Near-East long-term geo-archaeological survey of the Jerash and Ajlun area in Northern Jordan which started in 1986 under Jean Sapin’s supervision. The J. Sapin’s Ifapo East Jerash survey project started in 1984 and ended in 1987. F. Braemer assured that there was no information about this inscription and the survey in the catalogue, archives or reports of J. Sapin, especially of 1986-1987.
3. For the etymology and semantics of the root *nfs*, *nb/f/pš* in Semitic languages, see SEEBASS 1986, p. 531-555.
4. On the spread of the *nephesh* tradition in Arabia and the Levant, see MOUTON 1997. For a rich and detailed discussion on the *nefesh* and its uses in the epigraphical sources, especially in Nabataean inscriptions, see NEHMÉ 2010, p. 453ff.
5. STEINER 2015, p. 14ff., presented some explanations, theories and arguments on the origins of the *nephesh* cult and its backgrounds, i.e. (1) as the dwelling of the body in the *nbš/nfš* stele, (2) the presence of the deity in it, (3) the representation of the mortuary monument itself, or (4) the possible development of *npš* to be identified as the funerary monument itself.
6. KROPP & RAJA 2014, p. 406; STEINER 2015, p. 128-162. Kutumuwa asked for the erection of *nšb* stele in which his soul should reside “[...] *w ybl l nbš b nšb’ zn* [...]” “[...] and a ram for my soul, which is in this stele.” (STEINER 2015, p. 128f.).
7. HENNING 2001, p. 245ff.



Figure 2 et 3. The inscribed stone © ArScAn, F. Villeneuve

funerary *inscription* can be understood as a memorial, regardless of what it is written on a stela, a lintel, a sarcophagus, etc.⁸ From the Ḥawrān, L. Nehmé inventoried 21 inscribed *nefesh* monuments.⁹ It occurs with the same meaning and function in a wide range of Arabian and Arabic inscriptions, for example but not limited to, in the Hasaitic inscriptions from north-eastern Arabia,¹⁰ the Dadanitic inscriptions,¹¹ the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions of Yemen,¹² and finally in the Namara Old Arabic inscription.¹³

EPIGRAPHIC AND PALAEOGRAPHICAL REMARKS

The inscribed surface bears one line of deeply and precisely chiselled letters in an Ancient North Arabian (ANA) alphabet. The text is not damaged, and therefore the reading of the letters is absolutely clear. The inscription appears to have been executed by an experienced carver, who inscribed it in a deliberate manner. Whether the communities in or around the Gerasa area had professional carvers, as in urban areas of special institutional structure, is impossible to know for certain. In remote areas in the north-eastern Badia of Jordan, southern Syria, and northern Saudi Arabia, we encounter countless number of Safaitic inscriptions, including other ANA inscriptional types that have been implemented by people of nomadic lifestyle. Whether this epigraphical heritage represents the concept of “graffiti” or

8. MACDONALD 2006, p. 289. In this direction, NEHMÉ 2010, p. 461, concludes that in the Nabataean inscriptions from the Hawran, the term *nefesh* is used in three types of inscribed blocks: steles, door or window frames, or blocks that were probably inserted into a wall by the masonry, i.e. the *nefesh* comes materially either in the form of a stela, or as larger monuments that had at least a masonry facade. KROPP & RAJA 2014, p. 406, state that “[...] even a large tower-tomb is called *nefesh* and στήλη in a bilingual inscription. In the latter meaning it perhaps came to represent the ‘souls’ of an entire family, while at the same time acting as receptacle for their burials. As such, *nefesh* supplanted the customary term for tomb, QBR’.”
9. NEHMÉ 2010, p. 459-460. In the Nabataean cultural realm, there is a variety of *nefesh* forms and other funerary designations (see WENNING 2001). The Nabataean inscriptions contain a large number of terms designating funerary monuments, see ABDELAZIZ & RABABEH 2008 for a list of designations.
10. SIMA 2002.
11. SIMA 1999, p. 103.
12. BEESTON 1994, p. 41.
13. KROPP 1991.

not, is a debatable question and goes beyond the scope of the present article.¹⁴

Given the above description of the stone, we assume that the angled letters, here *b*, *f* and *s'*, are vertically positioned, i.e. the openings are directed downward, from which we can roughly and cautiously adduce the affiliation of the text / script to one of the mostly known ANA script types, either a variant of Safaitic or Thamudic B.¹⁵ The text begins with a hooked *l*, followed by an elongated bar, which is read here as *n*. Both shapes are usually encountered in Thamudic B inscriptions, and a shorter variant is encountered in Thamudic C. In the Safaitic inscriptions, the sign for *n* takes the shape of a dot or a short stroke. However, we should not exclude the possibility that it has been written in this form in the present inscription for aesthetic reasons, i.e. to match the length of the letters *b* and *s'*, as well as the length of the shafts of *h* and *l*. One may support the Thamudic B option for the present inscription because of the hooked *l* and elongated *n*, despite the fact that the introductory particle in Thamudic B is the *nm*. However, we should keep in mind that the *n* is also a short in stroke Thamudic B, and the hooked *l* is implemented in Safaitic. Therefore, it is not easy to see the grounds for preferring Thamudic B over Safaitic.

The *h* sign, with its shaft connected to the tapered part of the acute angle from the top, has the typical shape used across ANA script types and therefore cannot be taken as a basis for classification. The letter for *b* does not differ from other ANA types. It only varies in terms of the sharpness and roundness of the angles and the proximity of the two bars' ends (legs) to each other, as in Dadanitic. The sign for *f* is used in most of the Thamudic scripts, i.e. B, C, D, E (Hismaic) scripts, and sometimes in Safaitic.¹⁶

TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

l Nhb h-nfs¹

“For *Nhb* is this funerary monument”

PHILOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

The linguistic ANA identity of the text is ascertained.¹⁷

l:- The text begins with the particle *l*, which cannot mean anything else rather than “belong to, for”; it is difficult to understand it in this particular context as “by”. The traditional function of the *lām* in such a position, i.e. in non-funerary ANA inscriptions, is introducing the text and indicating the person who is the subject of the inscription. In this way, it has been compared to the so-called *lāmedh inscriptionis* in Biblical Hebrew.¹⁸ Encountering the same particle in such a funerary context would propose that it has been implemented here following the usual habit of writing Safaitic and other ANA inscriptions on rocks. It is usually translated as “by”, which is not understandable if we assign it to the deceased person whose name is incised on the slab.¹⁹ Eksell takes it as a marker of ownership, rather than authorship, in the meaning “belonging, to”, or “for”.²⁰

14. On this issue, see MACDONALD 2005 and 2008. The counterpoint to the graffiti hypothesis is discussed in AL-JALLAD 2015, p. 1-10.

15. For the question of typifying the ANA epigraphical variants, see MACDONALD 2000.

16. This shape can be encountered in Safaitic, especially in the southern inscriptions, such as those from Qurma (personal communication with A. Al-Jallad).

17. This designation refers to several types of inscriptions written in a South Semitic script and spread over North and Central Arabia. They are distinguished by certain script and stylistic features that discern them from Ancient South Arabian and other Semitic epigraphical types in the Levant and Arabia (MACDONALD 2000 and 2004 and HAYAJNEH 2011). This epigraphical heritage roughly covers the 1st mill. BC and died out by the 3rd-4th cent. AD (see MACDONALD 2010).

18. MACDONALD 2006, p. 294f. and n. 97-99.

19. See MACDONALD 2006, p. 294-295.

20. EKSELL 2002. Considering the Safaitic-Greek bilingual inscriptions, where the genealogy corresponds only to the individual

We also encounter this situation in some Thamudic E - Nabataean bilingual texts, where the introductory *lām* in the ANA version was not graphically present in the Nabataean version.²¹ Here, it can be concluded that the translation of the *lām* as an introductory particle depends on the context of the inscription.²² Wherever the discussion would lead regarding the role of *lām* in the present funerary context, the translation of the text should refer to a possessiveness rather than definitiveness element,²³ especially in this particular kind of inscriptions, cf. *AbaNS* 86: *l bhs² bnt hn² w mtt* “For *Bhs²* daughter of *Hn²* and she died” *Vogue* 404.2: *l ‘n bn ks² t h- nfs²* “This funerary monument is for ‘*n* son of *Ks²*’”.²⁴

Nhb: This is the personal name of the deceased. It is derived from the root *nhb* “take the spoil, plunder, booty, ...”²⁵ which is evident in the Arabian onomastics, e.g. *Nhb* in Safaitic²⁶ and Thamudic E *Nhb*.²⁷ *Nhbn* is also attested in the Qatabanic onomasticon as a personal name.²⁸

h-nfs²: The particle *h-* functions as a definite article “the”, or demonstrative pronoun “this” for near deixis, i.e. as in Safaitic. However, we encounter it in Thamudic E (Hismaic) inscriptions as a demonstrative marker.²⁹ For the following word *nfs²* “this funerary monument”, see the discussion above.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This inscription is one of the rare examples of an Ancient North Arabian script being used in the settled areas of the southern Levant. One may, however, cautiously assume that the reason behind the scarcity of such an epigraphical type in central and north-eastern, south-western and northern Israel goes back to the uninterrupted overlying urbanisation over this region during history, where Aramaic, Greek and Latin, as official and institutional languages, were dominant. On the other hand, one may postulate, that the text was written by one of the individuals who hailed from the areas where large numbers of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions are concentrated, i.e. the Hawrān/Harra region, or Hisma, who were passing by or came through on seasonal migrations between the east and west.³⁰ Due to the lack of

in the Greek version (e.g. Greek:4 WH 1860 (= + Greek 2) *l whblh bn zn² l bn whblh* ... Ουαβαλλας Ταννηλου του [] Ουαβαλλου ‘By *Wahballāh* son of *Zann²*’el son of *Wahballāh*’, one would conclude that its use is formal. See AL-JALLAD 2015, p. 5. Cf. also Safaitic *l N bn N h-nfs² t* in for example C 1704, *PAES* IV D 688, WH 924b, etc. (MACDONALD 2006, p. 295).

21. HAYAJNEH 2009b.

22. MACDONALD 2006, p. 294f. suggested that this *lām* has no certain meaning, i.e. “by” or “for”, especially in association to grave funerary inscriptions, referring to the grave inscriptions from Dayr al-Kahf, but is used as an introductory particle which indicates the subject of the inscription and indicating possession, or reflects the ‘close association with’, e.g. *l N h-rgm* ‘(this is) N whose cairn this is [i.e. it is built over his/her body]’, or *l N h-dmyt* ‘(this is) N whose drawing this is [i.e. it was carved by him/her]’. It is used as well in Nabataean-Aramaic funerary inscription, in sections of the tomb lintel *PAES* IV A 105 *l tnnw br hn² l npš²* (MACDONALD 2006, p. 295), which means, I would say, that it has no syntactic influence or role in the structure of the sentence, as the Nabataean formula in such funerary stones begins with a demonstrative pronoun “this”. E.g. in a Nabataean funerary monument inscription (*d² npš² hy² l*) “this is the funerary monument of *Hy²*’l” from North Jordan (HAYAJNEH 2002, p. 103f.). Here, the formula begins with the Nabataean feminine demonstrative pronoun *d²*, which would mean that in such a kind of ANA inscriptions one may expect a demonstrative, as is the case in Nabataean.

23. It is difficult to discern both from each other, as they are etymologically and semantically interrelated; the definiteness should have come from the article *h-*.

24. AL-JALLAD 2015, p. 4.

25. LANE, 2855.

26. *HIn*, p. 601.

27. *KJA* 42, 45, 96, in KING 1990, p. 592.

28. HAYAJNEH 1998, p. 252.

29. MACDONALD 2004, p. 517f.

30. Communities and groups living in these desert regions in North Arabia were never isolated; they had constant contacts with

evidence, it is challenging to conclude whether this individual had settled in the vicinity of Jerash or died during the migration and had been buried there.

The epigraphical evidence available from Jordan to date shows that Ancient North Arabian inscriptions were not only known from the traditional areas as were mentioned above, but evidence is encountered in other non-traditional areas, i.e. in Wadi Bayir area,³¹ to the north of Maʿān in Uḡruḥ,³² between Ayl and Rās an-Naqab,³³ between Ayl and Shammāḥ,³⁴ in al-Ḥusayniyya, north-eastern Petra,³⁵ in Khirbet as-Samrāʾ,³⁶ from Urayniba (ʿArēnba) in Madaba governorate,³⁷ Jerash,³⁸ and in Al-Ḥuṣn-Irbid area in the northern Jordan.³⁹

the urban neighbouring centres. This question was a subject of a detailed article by MACDONALD 2014. GRAF 2000, p. 810, dealt with the presence of ANA epigraphic types in Khirbet es-Samra area, and whether the authors of these inscriptions were local or aliens in the area.

31. CALZINI 1993 und AL-KHRAYSHEH 1994. This Wadi branch leads to Wadi as-Sirḥān, which extends across the Jordan-Saudi border. As a result of the survey conducted in Wadi Bayir, a collection of ANA inscriptions were discovered, among which a two-line inscription mentioning the Iron Age gods of Ammon, Moab and Edom (HAYAJNEH *et al.* 2015). All attempts to decipher the Canaanite one failed.
32. HAYAJNEH 2017, p. 293.
33. MACDONALD 2012.
34. HAYAJNEH 2016.
35. AL-SALAMEEN 2011.
36. KNAUF 1998.
37. GRAF & ZWETTLER 2004.
38. KNAUF 1981.
39. HAYAJNEH 2009a. The distribution of the inscriptions is of course largely determined by the availability of recordable materials. In some regions, the absence of a large number of inscriptions reflects the geological conditions, not the extent to which there were scribes. In the area around Maʿān on the Jordanian plateau in northern Hisma, for example, the desert offers very little suitable surfaces for carving of graffiti or rock drawings (see KING 1990).

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